



December 2, 2008

**Greg Nickels**  
Mayor

**Diane Sugimura**  
Director, DPD

**Karen Kiest**  
Chair

**Tasha Atchison**

**Brendan Connolly**

**John Hoffman**

**Mary Johnston**

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Hon. Greg Nickels  
Mayor of the City of Seattle  
Mayor's Office  
P.O. Box 94749  
Seattle, WA 98124-4749

Hon. Ron Sims  
King County Executive  
King County Executive's Office  
701 Fifth Avenue, Suite 3210  
Seattle, WA 98104

**Re: Alaskan Way Viaduct and Seawall Replacement Project**

Dear Governor Gregoire, Mayor Nickels, and County Executive Sims:

The Seattle Design Commission has reviewed the many component projects, north and south of the central waterfront, that constitute the bookends to the challenging Alaska Way Viaduct and Seawall (AWVS) project. The projects we have reviewed have shown the need to frame the entire project as a critical long-range investment in the City and in the competitiveness of this region. For the Central Waterfront, we must extend this larger frame and take a longer view of how the principles inform this most significant design decision.

We respect the physical and urban management intricacies that are involved because most of the Commission's work occurs in situations where a number of issues come together, requiring us to examine the long-term ramifications of choices while advancing the fundamental principles of good city design.

We have been impressed with the project team as it has moved these projects steadily and quickly along while achieving a palpable level of coordination and mutuality of purpose to achieve a larger and more responsive system of mobility including rail, truck, bus, car, bicycle and pedestrians. Equally significant, the team has addressed a range of scales — from the immediate, human-scaled concerns



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for details in materials and system legibility on up to the larger-scaled design considerations of serving the future of movement within the city as well as the metropolitan region. Against the backdrop of this project's great promise and challenges and the work to date, our deliberations lead us to a position on the central waterfront portion and to several fundamental principles that should inform the design.

**Commission position:**

***– There are only two viable starting points for the preferred option that can truly meet the challenges facing this City and the region while maximizing the associated urban design potentials of the project – the on grade option and the below grade option.***

Forty years ago, minutes from one of the first Design Commission meetings judged the elevated Viaduct as the wrong thing to have done to the city's waterfront because of its jarring scale, noise and shadows, and its barriers to views and connectivity. Forty years later, we concur with this assessment of the significant visual and physical impacts, and bring an additional design perspective that has emerged in parallel with the maturation of the city and our metropolitan region. Tomorrow's city is determined by the decisions made today. Short sighted and expedient decision-making has no role in building an enduring urban fabric. It is this responsibility to urban life and to maintaining and enhancing urbanism that must drive the next stage of decisions about this project.

**Fundamental principles that should inform this decision:**

- *The project has broadened to a greater, richer conceptualization of mobility within a vibrant metropolitan area.* The larger frame enlarges our perspective. It challenges our presuppositions about what is possible and necessary. This broadening should be inspiring, helping us to see city building as a process of opening rather than closure or as simply a means to an end. The shift to mobility and the larger frame distinguishes this as a project of the 21<sup>st</sup> century city; a catalytic investment that can unfold new urban possibilities, qualities and conditions.

- *This infrastructure investment project is large - its footprint and its impact – and the accompanying design thinking needs to be equally comprehensive.* This includes the immediate context of the city's waterfront (the small scale) up to the city's larger urban frame and also to the largest scale – the metropolitan regional connections beyond. The present elevated Viaduct is an aggressive combatant in the small, up-close, human scale of the city. It also walls off the next scale where one of America's vibrant urban centers could establish an inextricable marriage with its unique position on the ecological edge of a glorious bay, achieving extraordinary experiences of space, place and time. The choice fifty years ago did not even acknowledge the metropolitan scale and the critical economic equation that exists between strong region and its urban centers. This time, we must address all scales appropriately.

- *This investment project must be one that leads the way: a strategic move by the region – the State, County, and City -- for building a globally competitive economic and just environment for the long term.* Metropolitan regions are now the world's powerhouses of economic productivity; according to a recent study, the Seattle-Tacoma-Bellevue metropolitan area is the fourth most productive in the nation. As the trend continues to reinforce global regional units, competition among them increases. Some will meet the challenge by building a strong vision of their competitive advantages and by following this up

with solid strategies and actions. This project's critical duality lies in coupling the qualities of the city and the region. The quality of this investment holds sway over the future success of the region. How the region develops to compete in the world relies on how prescient and creative it is in achieving a balance between its urban and natural environments.

- *This investment project should be the strongest tangible evidence of a city and a region that knows how to lead change -- how to put pieces together by being creative, innovative, pragmatic and sustainable. Can we get the right things done, all across the spectrum of ecology, economy and culture?*

- *This large-scale investment project must be an expression of our values and position on the quality and potentials of urban life and regional vitality. The project's legacy of urban spaces and forms will be an enduring frame and the authentic expressions of this urban place. It is not about creating a unique new image of the moment, but of the long-term, durable content of our city. Cities are fundamentally all about attraction, social and economic exchange. The present viaduct is all about repulsion, and a replacement with a similar structure would be the same. This ribbon of movement between urban fabric and ecological expanse can and should become a destination - an unprecedented juxtaposition of landscape, urban transportation, and extraordinary facilities for enjoyment, unexpected surprise and contemplative retreat.*

We offer these principles to help frame your approach to the Alaskan Way Viaduct and Seawall Replacement Project as a strategic investment in the future of the city and the region together.

There is important transformative value in big decisions. It takes courage to make them. Staff has clarified the elements but the decision now is to imagine the city of the next millennium. We rely on your leadership to look beyond the present to see and to claim the potentials in this critical investment.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Karen Kiest', is written over a horizontal red line.

Karen Kiest  
Chair, Seattle Design Commission

cc:  
Seattle City Councilmembers  
Paula Hammond, *Secretary*, WSDOT  
David Dye, *Deputy Secretary*, WSDOT  
Harold Taniguchi, *Director*, KCDOT  
Grace Crunican, *Director*, SDOT  
Robert Powers, Robert Chandler, Steve Pearce, SDOT  
Ron Posthuma, KCDOT  
Mike Rigsby, WSDOT  
Diane Sugimura, Ray Gastil, DPD  
Barbara Wilson, Seattle Planning Commission